

Ana's Friends. Friendship in Online Pro-Ana Communities

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyse the social relationships within online communities of anorectics, their bonds, their emotions and friendships, and their subsequent relation to anorexia nervosa. The research has focused on their blogs and their forums, which create a space in which they share their experiences, and sometimes encourage each other not to give up on their eating disorder – which they view as an illness, but an illness that has become their lifestyle, and their attitude towards life. Within the article an analysis of the special bonds of friendship that tie the members of the online community together will be presented. Special attention will be paid to the similarities between secret societies and friendship bonds within pro-ana communities.

Keywords: *Friendship, Secret, Emotions, Internet, Anorexia, Pro-Anorexia*

Introduction

"I had no support whatsoever. I tried talking to family, but they did not care nor understand even though I am quite certain that I have a couple of relatives with eating disorders. In xxx, I got online to seek support and understanding. At the time, my nails were breaking and my hair was falling out. I was all alone. I started to injure myself and could not understand why it was so hard to get a shoulder to lean on. That is when I found (this forum). They understood what was happening to me as they were going through it themselves. They did not judge me, they understood and loved me."
(Sally, US proana/with ana forum)

1.1 In recent years, reports about blogs and forums of (above all) young girls sharing their experiences with anorexia, their thinspos (thinspirations), their wish to attain perfection or to be finally understood, have caught the attention of the media.^[1] Simultaneously these media reports brought the information about the existence of pro-ana (pro anorexia) online communities to many of the girls and women (some boys and a few men), who are now eagerly engaged in online pro-ana blogs and forums. These girls, boys, men and women became aware of the very possibility of 'pro-ana' as a central identity marker, of the existence of forums and blogs as possibilities to share thoughts and feelings as well as to find, and interact with, each other. Once they became aware of these possibilities, some anorectics sought to overcome online the isolation that is one of the main social consequences of anorexia,^[2] and thus became part of the so-called pro-ana movement – a social network consisting of people who agree on the idea that, despite being an illness, being ana (anorectic) is nothing to fight against, but rather something to live with, to be proud of, or even to build one's whole identity upon.

1.2 Many posts in the forums analysed and blogs highlight a very special bond of friendship, love, admiration or gratefulness that ties the members of pro-ana online communities together. Many argue that the necessity or desire to find people, who are going through similar experiences (and will, therefore, be able to understand them), is one of their main reasons for wishing to become an active member of a pro-ana/with ana forum,^[3] or for opening a blog that deals with their experiences with anorexia.

1.3 Furthermore, some people use the internet communication in order to find a 'twin', an intimate friend with whom they can either pursue further their road into anorexia, or get out of it. Since we have concentrated our attention on pro-ana/with ana communities, we have learned about these twins as those who help each other to lose more weight (or to lose it quicker), to support and strengthen the will in

moments of weakness, to cope with the consequences of the illness, or to hide anorexia from the friends and the family – with whom many pro-ana site users of the analysed pages have confessed to having difficulties. For those who have had difficulties, the online pro-ana community quickly becomes a substitute for their family and friends. For those who have not had any problems (or, as most sites would argue, who have not had any problems *yet*), warnings and pieces of advice will be given in order to manage the yet-to-come conflicts in the best manner, in order to 'be left alone with their eating disorder'; thus they will be given advice about the best methods to hide the eating disorder, and to defend themselves against their family and friends in moments of criticism, discussion and doubts. This does not mean that the members of these online communities talk only about their eating disorders: They share moments of suffering, of happiness, of boredom, fears and much more. But anorexia persists as an underlying layer, as a point of reference when giving advice and support, or helping each other in their daily life situations.

1.4 Pro-ana websites use a form of communication which is highly emotional and emotionalised – grief, suffering, ups and downs, the most intimate moments and feelings are presented and discussed within these blogs and forums. Sometimes discussions about these moments take place even at the very beginning of the acquaintance, when the new online friends are just strangers to each other out there in the world (wide web).

1.5 The objective of this paper is to analyse online communities of anorectics, their bonds, their emotions and friendships, and their subsequent individual and collective relation to anorexia nervosa, and to the online community they have built and/or are part of.

Theoretical Framework

2.1 In order to understand our analysis of friendship in pro-ana communities, we will elaborate on two different streams. First, we will briefly present our understanding of anorexia. Secondly we will dwell on a theory of friendship, anticipating the findings of our empirical work which will later be presented. We will complement the elaborations on friendship with Simmel's works on 'secret societies'.

Anorexia nervosa

2.2 Anorexia nervosa was hardly known only 40 years ago, despite the fact that it was clinically 'discovered' by William Gull in 1870. Still today it is viewed as an 'illness' that affects Western girls and women; especially beautiful, intelligent, middle and upper class, Western girls. This picture of anorexia blinds us to the fact that anorexia does not only affect women (although we are not denying that it mainly affects women), and that it does not only affect Western people; traces of anorexia can definitely be found in Latin America and Asia, and probably throughout the world. What does remain true, however, is the fact that it predominantly affects those who are wealthier.

2.3 From a medical perspective anorexia is seen as a psycho-physiological disorder, an illness caused by psychological, physiological and/or social malfunctions or defects. As sociologists, we focus on anorexia nervosa as a socio-psychological phenomenon (despite acknowledging that perhaps some physiological conditions may affect the development of the illness), a phenomenon that has its roots in the special social conditions of late modern society, under which fear, helplessness, anxiety and losing fear (which are at the heart of each modern individuals' search for a meaning and place in society) can lead specific people towards anorexia by filling it with the hopeful desire of the attractive offer of an ideal place for one's own: a place of successful self-mastering or refuge (often a combination of both). In the anorectics' minds these desires for a place, for belonging, for refuge and self-mastering are disconnected from their bodies, as if they would not be physical beings anymore, but their bodies were objects to be mastered, to dominated, and, at the end, to brought to the edge of vanishing.

2.4 Thus, despite the fact that for the outside observer anorexia might seem to be a pure psychological disorder, it is the late modern social setting that creates the seeds, and provides the necessary social and emotional elements, for the contemporary forms of anorexia.

2.5 In this article, we shall focus on anorexia nervosa from the perspective of the sociology of emotions.^[4]

Friendship

2.6 This paper does not view friendship as an emotion, but rather as a form of sociation. Friendship is an enduring social bond, in which many emotions can play (and do play) an important role; emotions such as love, thankfulness, feelings of security, the desire to be understood and trust.

2.7 Simmel, a key analyst of social bonds and forms of sociation, elaborated on friendship by contrasting 'modern friendships' with ancient ones. He contrasted the ideal type of friendship in former times (which he defined as aiming at a complete 'psychological intimacy') with modern friendships. He argued that modern friendships, due to the ongoing processes of differentiation and individualisation, tend to focus on one particular aspect that both friends share, or which makes them compatible, and thus these friends build their relationship of friendship (even intimate friendship) on the basis of this one point in common. (Simmel 1964:325-326)

2.8 Contemporary social scientists who have worked on friendship have discussed Simmel's position, as they interpret that it puts the imagined 'ancient' friendship model in a better light than the modern one. Indeed, it is not the end of the story to say that friendships have become more 'differentiated.' The role of friendship in contemporary (Western) societies has stretched its wings as it has taken over many tasks and responsibilities that were formerly assumed by family and kin. The reliance of many young families, for instance, on their friendship networks in order to organise their daily life and child care is substantial, as is

the reliance on friends for psychological support and understanding through many difficulties (often superior to the reliance given to family and partners). Spencer & Pahl 2006:1-31

2.9 Spencer and Pahl, after undertaking a long empirical research based on interviews and drawing schemes of 'personal communities' (Spencer & Pahl 2006:44-46), identified several types of friendship, going from the most simple form of friendship (the associates), followed by useful contacts, favour friends, and fun friends towards the more complex forms of friendship, starting from helpmates and comforters towards confidants and on towards the most complex form of friendship according to the authors: soul mates. (Spencer & Pahl 2006:60)^[5] Their definition of soul mate would be equivalent to Simmel's conception of an ancient friendship, while the more differentiated form of friendship that Simmel views as typical for modernity could evolve from the level of 'associates' towards the level of 'confidants.'

2.10 In the case of 'pro-ana(anorexia) friendships' that have been made on the internet, both simple friendships and more complex friendships can be found (despite the sites' self-presentation rhetoric of being family-like communities of the most intimate friends).

2.11 We doubt that the category of soul mate can be reached by 'mere' participation in online communities, for proximity in all senses seems to be also a key factor in this form of friendship. (Spencer & Pahl 2006:69)^[6] Rather, the figure of the confidant friend seems to be the most recurrent throughout the sites.^[7]

2.12 Friendships in pro-ana communities are friendships that respond to the second ideal type sketched by Simmel: the befriended people meet around one aspect of their personalities; an aspect (their anorexia and their relation to it) that colours their whole life. This does not mean that the members of the community solely communicate about their illness. In fact, they certainly do not. It rather means that, whichever topic they are discussing, anorexia remains the key in which the conversation is played. This applies to conversations about make-up and clothes, to conversations about sex and tenderness, to conversation about study techniques or family life. Never mind what the concrete topic is, anorexia always remains the implicit (or explicit) companion for the whole conversation.

2.13 People search for, and enter pro-ana (anorexia) forums with the very explicit intention of finding other people who are struggling with the same eating disorder, and who share similar views to their own on the subject. Thus, when somebody enters a pro-ana forum, s/he is not searching for friendship in a very general and all-encompassing sense, but searching for people who share her views on, and experience with, anorexia, and are furthermore willing to share these experiences and views, thus building a community.

2.14 The pro-ana community is close to a community in Tönnies' sense: a reduced group of people with a family-like structure; all known to each other, and in which their relationships are based on a strong bond of solidarity which, however, does not allow each individual member to differ much from the group if the group is to last (and the intention is indeed to make it last). At the same time though, this close community has its location in a virtual space, and the friends can not visit and hold each other, or bring each other a cup of tea every time they are in need of company or in trouble. The proximity can only be reached through a continuous online presence, and a certain density in posts. We will concentrate on these aspects later in the text.

Friendship and Secret

2.15 It is not easy for a researcher to know what happens within these online communities, as we will discuss in the next section. The great majority of forums and some blogs require a password in order to gain access to them, and many forums involve a highly arduous selection process in order for people to be able to read, and post on, most conversation threads. These characteristics make the forums we have analysed resemble 'secret societies', thus linking the special bond of friendship, as one of the basic forms of sociation, to the special role that the secret, and secret societies, play in the webbing of society.

2.16 The veiling of that which is written and said within the forums is not only meant to protect forum users from the anonymous gazing eyes of the World Wide Web, but – and above all – from the often worried, inquiring, circles of family and offline friends. In fact, many forum users and bloggers explicitly refer to their difficulties with their loved ones because a major part of what they feel is essential to them has to be blended out of the relationship. This leaves the online pro-ana community as the sole place and the only people with whom an unveiled sharing of one's life, feelings, emotions, beliefs and fears is possible.

2.17 Furthermore, since becoming a member of one of these communities becomes highly complicated, due to the tedious selection process, the desirability of being accepted in community grows, emphasising the 'greatness' of the possibility of 'finally' finding a family-like community – which is only an access and a password away.

2.18 We would like now to discuss the characteristics which, according to Simmel, secret societies share, as search for traces of such characteristics in our empirical analyses of the pro-ana forums. Simmel referred to several main characteristics of secret societies when wondering how the 'intra-group life is determined by the group's secretive behaviour towards the outside.' (Simmel 1964:34) We will list these characteristics now, briefly elaborating upon the most pertinent ones, and we will use them later in order to structure our analysis of the selected pro-ana forums in our findings.

2.19 According to Simmel, the main characteristics of secret societies are the following:

- a) Protection and trust: the first internal relation typical of the secret society is the reciprocal trust (*Vertrauen*) among its members. In fact, the main purpose of secrecy is protection,

invisibility being the most radical measure of protectiveness. The counterpart of this protective aspect is the reciprocal confidence among the members of the society, and their trust in the fact that whatever is shared within the society will not be revealed. (Simmel 1964:345-348)

b) Silence: Beyond the techniques of oath and threat of punishment in order to promote the secrecy, Simmel emphasised the cultivation of the 'art of silence' as a training of the individual capacity to keep to herself that which is confidential to the secret society. (Simmel 1964:349-351)

c) Written Communication: In principle there is nothing further from secrecy than written communication. Anyone can potentially read a private letter, which makes the breaking of this privacy a highly ignoble act. There is a contradiction between the private nature of the message, and the objectified and thus potentially public form of the communication of the message which, at the same time, is stripped of all those accompaniments of the spoken word (sound of voice, tone, gesture, facial expression, touch, smell, environment) which fill the naked message with nuances. (Simmel 1964:354)^[8]

d) Secrecy and Sociation: While the secret is often a means to protect the group, a group may also be created in order to preserve the secrecy of certain contents. (Simmel 1964:355)

e) Hierarchy: Simmel argued that 'all system-building ... involves the assertion of power', especially in those groups that are kept in the shadows as 'secret societies'. (Simmel 1964: 356-358)

f) Ritual: The case of the ritual is similar to the case of the hierarchical structure. The fact that secret societies are not organised by historical precedent, but built up from their own basis, makes the possible variety of rituals and hierarchical forms extremely rich, and consciously developed down to the last detail. The secrecy of rituals is sometimes even more 'sacred' than the contents that are kept secret, and they give meaning to the secret society. (Simmel 1964: 358-360)

g) Freedom: Every secret society contains a certain freedom, which the structure of society at large does not allow or make possible. The potential anarchy which this implies is controlled by the 'fixed and minute character of the ritual' followed in secret societies.' (Simmel 1964:361)^[9]

h) Features of the Secret Society as Quantitative Modifications of General Group Features: Simmel argued that secret societies have particular characteristics which derive from the fact that they are narrower groups within a larger whole.^[10] We will not examine them in greater depth for now.

Study Context and Methods

3.1 Our research is based on a discourse analysis of the data we have collected in various pro-ana/with ana forums since January 2009. We have paid special attention to the narratives on friendship and family-like communities that we have found within these forums. Ethical internet research is a highly contested and discussed issue in our field.^[11] Immediate questions arise when we enter a website, whose contents are public, but which have not been published (written and intended) for the gaze of the researcher. (Eynon et al. 2008:26) Are we allowed to work with this material? Are we violating someone's privacy if we do so? Are we violating already it simply by reading it with sociologists' eyes and minds?

3.2 On the concrete field of analysis we are dealing with here (this is pro-ana/with ana online communities), some studies have already been published which show that it is indeed possible to find ethical ways of gathering interesting data.^[12] Fielding et al. argue that, despite not being allowed to work upon (or rather, publish) these materials without any kind of restrictions, we are legitimated to do so if our working upon published contents (which have not been intended for research) leads to 'beneficial research, from a social or scientific viewpoint'. (Fielding et al. 2008:33) Indeed, gaining knowledge of pro-ana online communities can be of a great benefit, and certainly not only for sociologists. At the same time, we have anonymised (as we shall explain) all the quotes and pictures we have used so that the sources cannot be identified by internet search tools.

3.3 To carry out this study, we worked with two young women, Sarah (22) and Claudia (28). They are both German, both anorectic, and both acquaintances of acquaintances.^[13] These two young women were recovering anorectics by the time we interviewed them. They had been actively engaged in pro-ana forums, and had been following several pro-ana blogs in their recent past. In both cases it was their initiative to contact us, and offer their help.^[14] We met Sarah and Claudia twice. We spent two long afternoons (lasting until the evening) with Claudia in January 2009, and two long afternoons (also until the evening) with Sarah in April 2009. During these meetings, Claudia and Sarah talked about their experiences with anorexia and, above all, about their online experiences with pro-ana communities. They showed us through the pages they had been visiting, and the forums in which they were still accepted (and becoming less active) members.^[15] They offered us access to these forums by using their passwords. We declined their offer, and discussed with them their participation in the forums, reading with them some of their posts and conversation threads. We were able to take notes, ask many questions, and gain a mediated insight into what takes place beyond the open access areas of these pages. These evenings with Claudia and Sarah certainly shaped our understanding of online pro-ana/with ana communities, and helped us filter which

informations and confessions available in the open access areas of the sites (areas which do not require the use of a password) were coherent with that which could be found in the private zones of the pages.^[16]

3.4 The few quotes and pictures that will be found in this paper have been taken from the open access areas of the forums. Claudia and Sarah showed us that there were still areas to which they had not gained access yet in two of the forums, despite having long been active (sometimes very active) members of the community. They showed us through five German pro-ana/with-ana forums. Furthermore, we briefly discussed the two US-American Forums, in which they had also actively participated, and some of the many blogs which they followed. This paper, however, concentrates its analysis on the five German forums.^[17]

Findings. Pro-ana Forums as Secret Societies

4.1 The presentation of our findings will follow the structure of Simmel's elaboration on secret societies. In our view Simmel's elaboration includes, and structures, many of the results of our analysis, thus bringing together the two streams we mentioned before: anorexia (the **secret** society), and friendship (the **secret society**), for friendships in pro-ana/ with ana online communities are friendships that are built upon the secret of anorexia, and pro-anorexia.

4.2 (Pro-)anorexia is both the well-kept secret from the outside world of significant others (family, friends, school, work), and the reason that drives the members-to-be of the secret society to look for hidden platforms that might allow them to express 'freely' (or rather constrained in a different manner than the mainstream discourse on anorexia) what they feel about their illness, disorder, obsession, or, as they call it, 'their ana.'

4.3 Having said that, let us focus on the characteristics that have been listed and briefly dealt upon before, to fill them now with the specific contents of our empirical analysis.

a) Protection and trust: The members of the pro-ana forums analysed use names that are not their real names in order to hide their identity – this is the first element of protection with which the new user is confronted in these forums. Hiding one's identity is crucial due to the fear of being discovered by family or friends (who might not know about the illness, or might know about the illness, but not about the pro-ana approach to it). However, these nicknames do not only hide the 'real identity' of the person, but also give information about a different kind of 'real identity'; their 'identity' regarding their approach to anorexia. In a way, the chosen names offer a glance into their 'real self' within the 'secret society'. A few examples will suffice: Strawberry, Apple, Invisible soul, Tiny Dancer, Lilith, Bella, Serenity, Fragile, Misteriosa, Injured Soul, Black Princess, Skinny mouse and Lacrima.

4.4 These self-chosen names express the way in which the forum members feel, the ways in which they see themselves and/or think the group expects them to be. They include a sort of 'secret message' to the other members of the forum: a first glance at their owner's inner life. Furthermore these nicknames indicate the kind of role and function that they might (be willing to/ have been assigned to) play within the group.

4.5 To give oneself a new name is part of entering the pro-ana community. The process of name-giving can be also seen as a ritual (f), as a rite of passage that serves to bind the member to the group. It definitely protects them from being recognized.

4.6 Another item that serves for protection (and at the same time for identity-creation and trust-strengthening within the group) are the avatars used in the forum. Every person within the forum chooses a specific avatar as her visual representation. The picture also helps to give the member of the pro-ana community a kind of additional disguise: an image without representing herself. Interestingly enough, even if someone used a picture of her real self, it would stay unnoticeable, hidden behind the possibility of using any picture of any person.

4.7 Another important finding regarding (the narratives of) protection is the usage of the words 'family' and 'safe space' in the introduction/presentation of the forums. A crucial element for creating this kind of safe space is the set of rules that most forums share regarding privacy: it is widely agreed that it is forbidden to copy and publish pictures and diary entries from the forum. For instance:

'§3 Secrecy 3.1 What happens in the forum stays in the forum 3.2 Contact data of actual and former users are not to be published. 3.3 Passwords, internal links and so on must not leave the forum 3.4 Thinspirations might be an exception. With an agreement they might be used for publishing and other purposes.'

4.8 b) Silence: Besides the code of secrecy, which emphasises the necessity of not communicating information from within the forum to the outside, there is another result that highlights the importance of silence within pro-ana forums. In the forums, users are taught to keep silent about their participation in (and the very existence of) the forum, and to lie about their activities regarding anorexia in their offline life. This represents a hard training in silencing and lying. To remain silent about your activity, role and function as well as the structure of the forum are crucial elements for pro-ana society members.

4.9 On the other hand, and in contrast to the attitude towards the 'outside world', everything has to be shared within pro-ana communities. The code of silence is not applicable to internal communications with other members. Even in the half-public application forms of those who want to become forum members (in which they are asked to confess and expose a lot of details about their life) the requirement of sharing as many intimate details and information as possible becomes extremely tangible. Some forums argue a lack of information (despite pages and pages of written communication with the applicant) to explain most neglected applications.

4.10 The questions posed in the application form, and the more concrete questions asked afterwards by the forum members during the decision process, illustrate the forms of communication that take place within the forum once members have been admitted, as well as some of their rules.

4.11 This 'presentation' (*Vorstellung*) by filling and handing in an online application form is a kind of grey area within the forums: perhaps unwillingly, this is an area in which the secret of the inside is half made public.^[18] Whilst the highly homogenous questions posed and answered in this first step into the forum still hide a lot of the inner rules and contents of the forum from the public eye, the time of silence to the outer world starts after the complete addition of the applicant as a full member of the forum.

4.12 It is also interesting to note that the word 'silent' has been used in many of the users' nicknames, and even in the names of the forums: Silent angels, silent angel, silent fairy, and silent tears. Within these names the word 'silent' has a double meaning: on the one hand it represents the way in which these people perceive their life in the world outside of the forum, a world in which they have to keep silent about their anorexia; and on the other hand (especially in the case of using silent as part of the name for a forum), 'silent' stands for the way in which people (are supposed to) treat any piece of information given within the forum.

4.13 c) Written Communication: Written communication is the main form of communication within the forums. Comments, texts, diary entries, even 'chat' conversations, they are all written down in the forums, most of them open to all forum members. Momentary communications can be thus saved and kept for any future record. Even more: the writing and publication of texts within the forum is a necessity, one of the fundamental rules of all forums. In fact, in many forums, if a user fails to post anything for a few days/weeks, she will be deleted. In others, she will receive a phone call asking whether everything is fine. If she is fine and just did not feel like posting, she will more than likely be deleted too. See for instance the following quote:

'\$6 Check Out

6.1 Those who cannot post in the forum for longer than three days must proceed to check out.

(...)

6.3. If a candidate does not post anything for longer than three days, s/he will be deleted.

6.5 Full members who have not been online for three days will be labelled as 'inactive'. However they will still have a week time to excuse their absence. Possibly they will have to take a punishment into account, like being downgraded to candidate.'

4.14 Or, in a different way:

'We have the telephone numbers of all our members. This is not a means of control. But when somebody fails to post regularly, we fear that something has happened to her, and we give her a call to make sure that everything is alright.'

4.15 d) Secrecy and Sociation: Regarding secrecy there are two forms of secrecy which are crucial to pro-ana communities within the forums – individual and collective secrecy. The approach to anorexia, the internal rules of the forums, and information shared within the forums, are highly confidential. It is the shared secret about anorexia and about the forum activity that makes the members of the online community believe in the group. Individual secrecy plays another crucial role for the functioning of pro-ana communities. Within the forum there has to be no secrecy. On the contrary: the rules of the forum *quasi* demand that there is none. Everything will be talked about; and this includes especially all those issues which members of the forum have learned to hide from their loved ones. To show the trust in the community, and in each of its members, the exposure of secrets is a fundamental element for the functioning of the group. In fact, the forums have, in their different formats and structures, specific areas which are reserved for 'secrets' and 'confessions'. They are visualised in a way that represents, at the same time, the secret and the confidential nature.

4.16 e) Hierarchy: Besides the fact that members of the forum all have to follow the same set of rules, there is a clear hierarchy within pro-ana groups. These hierarchies are sometimes more, sometimes less visible. More often than not they are quite visible.

4.17 The experience of hierarchy when entering a forum is felt from the very beginning: first of all, there are the people who decide whether you are allowed to enter. Secondly, there is a hierarchy between the admittes (administrators) and the normal members (and therein we might find different categories of members according to seniority, or according to their loss of weight); the admittes have the constant right to decide whether you are blocked, punished, or downgraded. Thirdly, in most forums there is a test phase for new members after which the older ones can decide to expel the new member from the forum. Fourthly, in many forums there are different statuses that a member can reach – from beginner, probation member, and teacher to positions such as queen, modmiss (moderator in a sector of the forum) and admitt (administrator of the forum).

4.18 The right to read secret or personal information, and to decide on the fates of other members differ according to the position within the group. This becomes especially visible in the event that someone disregards the rules. It is the admitt who decides whether, and in what way, to judge the member who has failed. See the following example of a member who failed to post regularly:

'Please, I am so sorry for not having posted anything over the last days, I had real problems at home. My father started drinking again and my mother and my father argued every day.'
(Fairytale, 17)

"That sounds horrible. Maybe we should take a vote as to whether you can stay a member of the group."
(ColdStone, Admiss, 17)

4.19 f) Ritual: The participation in rituals, and the ritualisation of many everyday life practices, are key elements to the functioning of the forums. There are some rituals that are followed by all forum members; there are others that are reserved for one member and her 'twin.' Collective fasting is one of the most widespread rituals that we found in the forums. However, not all forums accept this form of collective ritual and opt, for instance, for rituals which have more to do with fashion and consumption, such as agreeing to wear the same clothes on a particular day (remember that forum users live far away from each other – in this case in several German and Austrian cities and, therefore, this wearing the same clothes is something that only they know about, and which makes them feel especially – and in a way secretly – connected). The daily writing of diaries, required in some forums, also acquires a ritual nature, and in one of the forums was even considered a *sine qua non* condition for membership.

4.20 In one forum, the ritualisation of the little food they consume (at the times when they are not fasting) restricts what they eat according to the colours of the ingredients; for instance, 'Mondays are green days', which means that the only food that can be eaten has to be green (food colouring is not allowed), or 'Sundays are blue days' (and remember that food colouring is not allowed).

4.21 If a member fails to follow the rituals, she will be punished. The punishments for not following the rituals are not the same as those imposed for not posting; they tend to be linked to fasting days and exercise, and vary according to the perceived gravity of the 'offence'.

4.22 The figure of the 'twin' is of great importance. The 'twin' is a 'special' person in the forum with whom the member has (must have) an intimate relationship, more intimate than with the rest. The twin is the first person to talk to, the person to fast with, the person who has access to private areas within one's own page no one else (but the admises) will have access to. The twins are there to give each other moral support, and in the forums where losing weight and fasting are goals, they are there to remind each other of the importance of what they are doing, to fast together – thus giving each other 'strength' to fast, competing in a way with each other to see who has managed to fast longest, and so forth. See the following quotes regarding the role of the twin:

'I would never have made it without my twin. She's always been there for me. I have finally come to terms with who I am, and I am not hurting myself anymore. The cutting is over, she's helped me to reflect upon my childhood... and I will not punish myself for that all any further. She's gorgeous.'
(Cinderella, 23)

Or:

'I have been fasting for seventeen days. Finally managed a real fast. Thank goodness. Or really, I must thank Lily, who gave me the strength I needed, and pulled me back into going hungry. I had forgotten the wonderful feeling of being hungry. Thank you Lily!'
(Eve, 25)

4.23 g) Freedom: Despite the obvious constrictions that the forums analysed impose on their individual members, their claims are that they have created, and share, a space in which they can express themselves freely, in which they do not have to hide their 'ana', or perhaps even their 'love' for 'ana'. Despite the strict rules and rituals which have to be followed and observed, these forums are presented as a 'finally finding a home, a family who understands, and respects who you are and want to be.' (open presentation of one of the forums analysed).

4.24 h) Features of the Secret Society as Quantitative Modifications of General Group Features: Simmel argued that the secret society acquires certain characteristics through the 'mere' fact that it is a small group within a larger one; thus, 'artificial' boundaries have to be built and protected in order to preserve the nature of the group as such, and in order to protect the shared secret and the hidden identities. The fact that the secret society exists in the first place can only be explained and understood through the understanding of the larger society: the dominant discourses and social practices within it, the processes of production, and consumption, and the dominant rituals of friendship, relation, and identity. Thus Simmel argued, when considering the role that the secret plays in the processes of webbing society together: 'The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former.' (Simmel 1964:330)

4.25 Applying these ideas to our object of study, we could claim that pro-ana communities would not exist in the way they do if our society as a whole had other dominant discourses and practices, if the daily webbing of reciprocal actions and effects (*Wechselwirkung*) among its members followed different patterns. Within late modern capitalist societies, in which discourses about physical beauty, youth, consumption, hedonism, mix with discourses about self-responsibility, work, production and accumulation, forms of 'rebellion' (we are not connoting this positively) emerge as symptoms of individual uneasiness with social patterns and constraints. In many ways, anorectics live the contradictions of the main society to the limits; to limits that flirt with self-destruction.

4.26 In relation to the elements that characterise the relationship of the smaller (secret) society to the

larger one, we would like to concentrate on the aristocratic motive. On the one hand because many of the observations pertinent to the other listed elements have indirectly been dealt with above in discussing the other characteristics of the secret society, on the other hand because the material analysed shows that the aristocratic motive plays a crucial role in the webbing of pro-ana communities.

4.27 In the interplay of the smaller secret society with the larger society, the aristocratic motive serves to preserve the secret group by making its members believe that they are something special, distinguished and exclusive. This contrasts sharply with one of the main characteristics of anorexia, which is that most anorectic people have a strong sense of being worthless. However, or rather precisely because of this, the aristocratic motive works all the better. Pro-ana community members' feeling of being 'special' is restored through their belonging to the group; it is the community that gives back to each individual member their 'value', their sense of their 'worth' and, furthermore, of even being better than the others; those who are weak and cannot control their hunger, and cannot 'strive/hunger for perfection.'

4.28 This striving for perfection, which is a constant in the forums analysed, is the main source of the image of 'aristocracy' which is often used in the pro-ana community. See the following quotes and pictures:



(German forum)

4.29 They combine the idea of gold (and the elegant feather) with their feeling of mediocrity, *their momentary commitment* to their intended journey towards (to become a) the star(s). The fact that the quote is in Latin strengthens the aristocratic presentation. Inaccessible to most (in Germany, Latin is not a compulsory subject at school at all), understandable for the selected few.

4.30 The pictures, of course, also complement the 'aristocratic' appearance. Indeed, the skinny girls in the picture, portrayed in an erotic light, embody the desirability of the difficult, but unnegotiable, goal.

4.31 Or, in the following picture, the concepts of perfection (in capital letters) and of Goddess (also in capital letters) underline the ideal of aristocracy by introducing its divine character. Anorexia, thinness, underweight, feather light, bones... all these words point towards an ideal of aristocracy which does not only imply a body, and the shaping of the body, but an entire lifestyle (which rules over the 24 hours of each day, every day); a lifestyle of control, exercise and 'purity' which only 'aristocrats' are strong enough to follow.



'In our eyes this is Perfection!

Pastel white features, high cheek bones, scarlet coloured lips and deathly tones!

Feather weight perfection!

An Underweight Goddess!

And The thinner you are the more beautiful you are!

When bones show we feel closer to perfection!'

(copied from an American page into a German forum)

4.32 And, finally, connecting the two elements we mentioned above (i.e. extremely low self-esteem and aristocratic beauty and self-control), see the following quote:

'What causes Ana:

The moment that made you change was when someone you loved told you that you were fat!
You thought fucking hell, I must be fat, I have to do something about this!
Depression, binge eating, self harm as a way to cope with problems rather than talk, bottle it up and try to make all the hurt go away!
Wanting more control over life!

(copied from an American page into a German forum, our emphasis)

Discussion

5.1 The presentation of the results of the analysis following Simmel's elaboration on secret societies has shown the clear parallels between pro-ana online communities and secret societies. The question to be discussed remains: what spaces for the development of friendships do online pro-ana communities (i.e. 'online secret societies') allow? In our view, the relationships of friendship which can be built within these forums differ from the ancient model of friendship presented by Simmel, or the soul-mate model described by Spencer and Pahl – even in the case of the mentioned 'twins'.

5.2 The pro-ana community members do not actually look for relationships that build, and involve, a complete psychological intimacy. In fact, the rules of the forums already prohibit this possibility, as members of one of the forums analysed, for instance, 'are not allowed to talk about their possible wish for suicide' – even if it is real, and a growing part of one's identity and/or pain; and their conversations evolve concerning, above all, the themes of food, fasting and anorexia, and to a lesser extent, beauty, sexuality and relationships to members' (offline) significant others.

5.3 Thus, friendships in pro-ana communities evolve concerning one particular aspect of the befriended people: anorexia. Most of the time the communication, the support given, and the understanding shown will revolve around anorexia, food and problems related to eating disorders. It is within this field that the relationships of pro-ana community members are webbed, and in which they gain their identity as such. This does not mean that no other topics are discussed within the forum. If we take a look at the structure of one of the forums (which does not differ much from the structure of the other forums analysed), we gather the following list of topics (organising clusters of conversation threads):

'Open area: 1. About this forum, 2. Contra, 3. Links and Corner for the Ex-Angels.

Presentations/Applications (*Vorstellungen*): 1. Waiting Room, 2. Presentation (free), 3. Presentation (not free), 4. Presentation (internal).

Current, Organisation: 1. Open Office, 2. First Stop, 3. Happy Birthday, 4. Flea market, 5. Absence.

All about us: 1. Ana, 2. Mia, 3. Other Eating Disorders, 4. Relatives, Family, Friends, 5. Psyche, 6. Abuse/Addictions/Depressions, 7. Pets, 8. Beauty.

How are you?: 1. Happy Day, 2. Bad Day.

A Day: 1. Ideas & Tricks, 2. Kitchen, 3. Sport.

Motivation: 1. Trigger and Motivation, 2. Thinspiration, 3. Contests.

Together it gets better: 1. Action, 2. Twin Area.

The Truth: 1. Extended Area (Gallery), 2. Diary, 3. Secret.

In the Meantime: 1. Books, Music, and Films, 2. Media and Press, 3. Smalltalk, 4. Abroad, 5. Creativity.

Help & Self-help: 1. Fight against the Eating Disorder, 2. Medicine/Health, 3. Therapy & Self-help.

Forbidden Zone: 1. Bureau, 2. Archive.'

(German Forum)

5.4 The forums analysed – despite their clear norms of posting and their harsh procedures of admission to, and expulsion from the group – present themselves as a big family and/or as a community of friends, in which the individual can let herself go and be this 'real self' that has to be kept hidden from the coercing outside. See, for instance, the presentation of one of the forums, which can serve as a paradigmatic example of what we actually find in all the forums analysed:



(German forum)

5.5 The familiar intimacy ('a place called home' – we can read in the picture) which is expected in the forums, and presented as one of its main riches, works with the idea that the community, the members of the forum, will always be there for their members in need. In the picture we see the representation of this reliability in the hand-written, simulated personal message that asserts the durability of this commitment. This personal-like commitment is laid next to a feather, symbol of the feather weight of the anorectic, of their gracefulness and fragility. Also the butterfly, at the other side of the picture, comes to symbolise the same: their goal, their ideal of beauty, the lightness to the extreme that allows them to cheat gravity and fly. In the centre of the picture we find the message that describes the forum: 'Life is about moving on, forgetting the sorrow & pain, remembering the joy & fun, & treasuring whatever that means the world to you.' Next to it is: 'You are my everything.' The main text is threatened by half open scissors, as if they were just about to cut the paper in two pieces. Within the context of anorexia this scissors can have a set of meanings, all contributing to the global picture. The scissors might represent the outer world that steadily tries to cut the word of the anorectic, annihilating the meaning and values shared within the community by placing them outside the norm, by branding them as sick. But the scissors cutting the letter into pieces also represent the self-value of its members; as if their words, and themselves, were meaningless for the outer world – and often even for themselves. The scissors can also mean that there is no coherent text about what they are, and the ways in which they feel as if they – fragmented as they are and perceive themselves to be – have no coherent "I", no coherent biography and therefore, no coherent text to write about. They (the scissors) could also point towards the purely material dimension, thus the scissors representing their wish to cut their (for them overweight) body, helping their wish to disappear, to stop speaking and thinking. The other side of the 'sweet' friendship and family-like rhetoric of the rest of the elements in the picture.

5.6 Thus, we face a clear contradiction between the fact that the only real point in common between these 'friends' is their eating disorder, and the claim of 'belonging to one big family', and the group of 'the most dear friends.' This contradiction makes us aware of the fact that, in the discourse presented in the forum, anorexia colours and moulds the whole personality of the anorectic, and thus, arguing that the idea of the complete psychological intimacy is not an exaggeration for them. The point is that precisely through their engagement in the community, in their intimate relationship with their twin, or in following the pieces of advice given by the godmothers, the aspects of the personality that are webbed around the eating disorder

acquire an increasingly central and crucial position in one's personality and understanding of oneself. The engaged community members end up defining their whole being through it (some proudly claim that they spend five or six hours on the internet, engaged in forum activities).

5.7 The dependency relations created between the individual and the community are so strong that, when an individual fails to accomplish what has been expected of her, and gets punished with expulsion (or threatened with it), she begs for forgiveness as if she were losing her hold on existence. Perhaps this element of dependency is the element missing in Simmel's categorisation which, for us, is of extreme importance in order to understand the reciprocal actions and effects within the pro-ana community – it could be included in the element of de-individualisation (i.e. the melting of the individual in the community), but, in our view, the issue of dependency deserves a point on its own.

Concluding Remarks

6.1 Contemporary Western societies have taken a direction that has produced anorexia as a kind of identity dysfunction. From our point of view, the developments in Western late modernity have been decisive for the growth and success of anorexia (and pro-anorexia) as a social phenomenon as they make it possible – within the ideal of self-mastery and self-regulation – to combine the paradigms of rationalism and control with the paradigms of hedonism of beauty and consumption. Anorectic people are symptomatic members of these societies, as they combine 'discipline' and 'perfectionism' with an excessive consumption of the body for being beautiful, at the same time as for leaving the body and its needs behind.

6.2 The members of late modern societies do not easily find confidant or soul-mate friends. And this despite the fact that people now rely more on friends than on relatives and families for many issues in life, and are often viewed as the best valued and most durable intimate relationships. Friendships have become a necessity, a must that has to be created by force if necessary.

6.3 In the pro-ana online communities analysed we have been able to observe the ways in which anorectics enter these spaces and strip themselves before the eyes of strangers in order to be able to become a member of a community of 'most intimate, best friends', and the ways in which the model of friendship created within these digital spaces has nothing much to do with being soul-mate friends. Indeed, the social relations webbed within the forums of pro-ana communities are very similar to secret societies, as we have shown in our findings; that is, they are similar to social formations that coercively demand openness and intimacy on the basis of a shared secret and a shared belief. In searching for salvation in a world beyond society, or rather, at the edge of society, pro-anorectics turn their friendships into 'quasi-sacred' alliances, in which an excessive rationality and the superficial image have become the structuring elements, not just for their identity, but also for their role as members of the group, and for all the relations webbed within the group.

6.4 Here 'friendship' and the 'family' turn into a trap in which the individual, the anorectic, becomes caught, opened up, willingly forced to confess, and to keep secrets. The world beyond the relations within these forums becomes increasingly impossible, as it becomes a threat and a corruptive field to the ideals and relations within the forums. Having a life outside the forum might at some point mean not much more than a threat to the member's whole life that has been, is, or might increasingly be reduced to the life in the forum, to a life of an anorectic person among disembodied friends and a disembodied family.

6.5 Emotions play a crucial role in this webbing of pro-ana online communities, in the binding of each of its members to the community, and in the structuring of its hierarchical order, as well as in the creation of its hidden (or half-hidden) spaces of intimacy (which are also hierarchically structured: admits do not ever show their emotional nakedness in front of the newcomers, but instead ask them to expose their entire emotional being in relation to their eating disorder and to life in general in order to become a member of the community.) Of course, those anorectics who enter into these online communities are willing to expose themselves and their most intimate feelings to become members of the group. Belonging to a pro-ana community makes them feel less alone with their illness, and with their view of the world and of themselves. Feeling less alone, they feel more confident, a little bit less worthless, a little bit more secure in the routines and decisions of their daily lives.

6.6 This emotional bond to the community, which is so strong because it is intimately related to their innermost feelings of worth, safety and belonging to a community of 'equals' (in regard to their eating disorder and their view on it), makes the relations of dependence (which are constantly reinforced by the fulfilment of the above-mentioned emotional needs) and hierarchy acceptable and desirable in the eyes of the anorectic; however, it also means that the relationships established within the pro-ana forums are taken far from the relations of equality which, ideal-typically, characterise relationships of friendship in their simple as well as in their more complex forms.

Notes

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3580182.stm> (21 August 2004),
<http://www.newsweek.com/2008/11/22/out-of-the-shadows.html> (23 November 2008),
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/8261268.stm> (17 September 2009),
<http://www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2010-07/pro-ana-loeschen-magersucht> (20 July 2010),
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1265944/I-online-role-established-model-pro-anorexic-teens-says-recovering-student-posted-pictures-emaciated-body-Bebo-inspire-starve.htm> I, (1 August 2010),

² See Garrett 1998, Saukko 2000, or Ward 2007 for accounts of the experience of loneliness by anorectics.

³After the massive shutting down of pro-ana forums and blogs, a discursive shift has taken place in most of the remaining or renewed pages. They have stopped calling themselves pro-ana, and have rather adopted the denomination of 'with ana', which means that they do not encourage anorexia, but rather 'offer a place for people with eating disorders who are not willing or not able to overcome their illness.'

⁴See Flam 2002. See also Stets & Turner 2007.

⁵In simple friendships, friends play well-defined and somewhat circumscribed roles. The friends may be associates who share a common activity, useful contacts who exchange information and advice, neighbourly or favour friends who help each other out, or fun friends who socialize together... (s)imple friendships have one main basis. Complex friendships, on the other hand are multifaceted, based on different configurations of qualities and roles.' (Spencer & Pahl 2006:60-61, 65)

⁶Nonetheless the imaginary of the soul mate plays a crucial part in the rhetoric presentation of most pro-ana pages, especially concerning the figure of the 'twin.'

⁷These relationships involve the disclosure of personal information as well as enjoyment of each other's company, but confidants do not necessarily live near by and so may not always be in a position to offer practical help and support (...) Confiding friends vary in their degree of intimacy, however: while the closest confidants can be told one's darkest secrets (...) these secrets might not be shared with less intimate confidants.' (Spencer & Pahl 2006:68, our emphasis)

⁸For Simmel's treatment of written communication Simmel 1964: 352-355.

⁹For Simmel's treatment of freedom, see Simmel 1964:350-351.

¹⁰He listed the following characteristics as the central ones: 1) separateness, formality, consciousness, 2) seclusion (signs of recognition through which the individual identifies – and legitimates – herself as a member of the group, 3) the aristocratic motive, 4) degrees of initiation (formal and material separation from the outside), 5) Group egoism, 6) Inclusiveness and exclusiveness as group principles, 7) Seclusion against the outside and internal cohesion, 8) Centralization (of power and obedience), 9) De-individualization, 10) Equality of all members, 11) The secret society and the central government (the danger that secret societies represent to the central organs of power of the larger society). (Simmel 1964:361-376).

¹¹See Hine 2000, Hine 2005, Eynon et al. 2008, and Fielding et al. 2008.

¹²See, for instance, Dias 2003, Ferreday 2003, Gavin et al.2008, Saukko 2000 and Ward 2007.

¹³The names given here are not their real names.

¹⁴Claudia expressed her interest in participating in our research as follows: 'I am currently getting out of anorexia; still feeling alone sometimes, still having really bad times, and flashes sometimes; but firmly convinced that I am on the right path towards a fulfilled life again. XX has told me about your research project, and I really appreciate your effort and your will to bring to light what is going on in pro-ana sites. I am an active member of these sites, and I would like you to consider my help for your research. Please don't see me as a traitor. I would view helping you gaining access to this underworld as a part of a cathartic process of healing. Don't worry, I am not expecting you to be my therapists. I mean that participating in your research will help me to gain distance from the old me who used to play an active part in these sites.' Sarah expressed the same feelings about her participation in our research in our private conversations after she had contacted us.

¹⁵Neither of them is participating in these forums any more (September 2010).

¹⁶The differences between what was asserted in the open access areas and what could be read in the private areas were, as expected, notable.

¹⁷We have long been discussing whether we should make explicit which forums we have been visiting and researching. However, out of respect for the two women who 'shared their secret' with us, and the users of these forums, we have opted not to mention the names and addresses of the forums analysed. We know that through the quotes used from their open access pages it will not be difficult to identify the forums used (probably despite the translations into English of the quotes). Notwithstanding, this seemed to us the most correct option.

¹⁸Here we find a significant difference between the German forums we analysed and the American forums which we briefly discussed with our informants. In the German forums the process of becoming a member is harder, and most applicants are refused. Despite knowing that there is little we can say with the qualitative data we have collected, we observed that the American forums did not require the filling in of application forms which asked for the innermost details of one's intimate life in order to expose one's relationship to the eating disorder and, through it, to the rest of the world. Furthermore, there are no rounds of questions posed by the forum's members in order to find out more about the applicant's compatibility with the members of the forum, and the authenticity of her request. For the US-American forums we were informed about, all that was needed was an E-mail address and some general data about the person. After the submission was sent, the administrator or moderator of the forum had to review the request, and add the person to the forum.

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